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ABSTRACT

A variety of research studies have indicated that fathers' availability and their leadership are vital to the healthy functioning of each individual in the family. One study showed that in 48 societies fathers assume an instrumental role in family life, while in only eight societies is fathering predominately an expressive function. Occasionally, a father's personality does not lend itself toward effective human relationships with children. Some fathers are uncomfortable in the decision-making role, in conflict strategy, and in taking the leadership reins. According to the literature, the ineffective, passive father is one who relinquishes the instrumental role. In all theories related to sex-role adjustment, the father is a particularly powerful influence on the son's masculine orientation. A girl's heterosexual relationships are strongly aligned with the kind of fathering that she experiences. The emotional, cognitive and social development of children are reported to be adversely affected by fathers' absence. Clearly, fathers' contributions are not as peripheral and indirect as was formerly believed. Strengthening fathers' preparation for their responsibility is urgent. Both the creative act of human life and the healthy nurturance of children require a mother and a father. (Author/RH)

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# THE EFFECT OF FATHER-ABSENCE AND INADEQUATE FATHERING ON CHILDREN'S PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Debbie Coonrod

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In appreciation of the fathering received by Marcee and Chic from their dad, Ralph Coonrod.

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## Introduction

A deeping sense of personal autonomy results as mothers and fathers see their children developing self confidence, exhausting the resources for learning that are available, and mirroring their attitudes and beliefs about positive living. Operating with a trial-and-error technology of child-rearing does not guarantee satisfaction with self in the parental role.

Like many couples, Ralph and I found ourselves pursuing a life style of long work hours, frequent moves, and frequent periods of father-absence. The long view did not promise the rewards of a strong springboard from home for our children to enter adolescence and adulthood that we desired for them. We made a gut-level decision to control the influences of the corporation's practices and policies on our children and our lives.

A few years later it was possible to pursue a study of the available literature of father's influence on the child's developing personality. The resulting dissertation led to an enduring interest in parenting.

It is my (our) opinion that parents can and will do a careful job of decision-making when given adquate information about natural consequences, options, and alternatives.

Ephesians 6:4 D.H.C.

# The Effect of Father-Absence and Inadequate Fathering on Children's Personality Development

by

Dr. Debbie Coonrod

The absent father in the context of our cultural expectations for the family generates a number of dilemmas. Providing the needed financial support for children places a great strain on the single woman physically, emotionally, and socially. The struggles and burdens on mothers become handicaps for the children. Yet, according to demographic data 33 percent of black families and 10 percent of white families are headed by women (Farley, 1977).

In the past war has definitely been responsible for father absence. One of the monsters of the American work ethic and the corporative structure is the removal of fathers from their homes. Finally, in my opinion, a lack of knowledge by fathers of the effect of their behavior and their availability on the developing personality of the child is shortchanging the potential of their children as adults and of themselves as fathers to becoming actualized human beings.

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Societal Expectations for Father

Our knowledge of group behavior reliably predicts that father's role in the nuclear family unit must portray a role model cohesiveness that is compatible with the expectations of the greater society for paternity. As society's expectations change so will the profile of fathers as a larger group.

In 48 societies fathers assume an instrumental role in family life while in only 8 societies is fathering predominately viewed by the culture as an expressive role (McCandless, 1968).

By definition, the instrumental role includes the paternal potential for strength and power in character and activity. Father is perceived as the primary provider of material needs, the interpreter of societal codes, the coordinator of community resources, and the limit-setter for all members of the family (Benson, 1968).

In contrast, the expressive role represents an interdependence and communication from between father and child from birth. It includes the physical care of the child's both explicit and implict needs.

Fathers' involvement in child-rearing duties, in the educational process and in the spiritual molding of the child hits an all-time low in the post-World War II decades. Divorce, mobility, over-time, corporate structure, and a general negative value for the importance of father-

involvement during those first years contribute to this decreasing involvement.

Fathers who do not engage in the growing stages of their young sons often become devoted enthusiasts of the sport activities of their teenagers. Girls most often continue through the teenage years with similar or less attention from father than they had experienced as young children.

Studies indicate that children who meet their potential in academic settings have fathers who are available for a minimum of six to fourteen hours per week (Blanchard & Biller, 1971), prefer young children (Barton, Dielman, & Cattell, 1974); promote independence (Coonrod, 1977); develop information seeking dialogue; and read stories, count and sing with their child from an early age (Radin, 1973). These fathers have a positive masculine self-image (Jackson, Meara, & Arora, 1974); set limits (Norwick & Segal, 1974; Hoffman, 1961); and have a purposeful and supportive working relationship with their wives (Biller, 1974).

Paternal Deprivation

Occasionally a father's personality does not lend itself toward effective human relations with children. Most often, however, the male has not had the opportunity prior to fatherhood to study his role in the family. Paternal behavior is based on neither knowledge nor belief. Decisions in parenting are made on the observable facts at hand and

are reactionary at best in the majority of the cases. The paternal role model an individual father adopts is often based on the familiar, "the way Dad did it."

Some fathers are uncomfortable in the decision-making role, in conflict strategy, and in taking the leadership reins. The cautious and less secure male may, in fact, abdicate both the customary instrumental dimensions of fathering and the equally desirable expressive behaviors. Role-reversal by parents in the family government is as debilitating to personal autonomy of the child as father absence. In fact, many of the recent scholars of paternal influence on children's development feel that the influence of the ineffective, passive father, and the over-restrictive and rejecting father are, in some cases, even more damaging to healthy personality formation than the effects of the absent father.

According to the litrature, the ineffective, passive father is one who relinquishes the instrumental role. This paternal model prefers that the wife make all the decisions concerning the children (Barton, Dielman, & Cattell, 1974). On the other hand, the over-restrictive and rejecting father holds high expectations for behavior prior to the child's developmental ability and uses harsh, strict disciplinary means for obtaining conforming behavior (Barton, Dielman, & Cattell, 1974).

Sex-role Adjustment

In all theories related to sex-role adjustment, both fathers and mothers play a vital role. The father is a particularly powerful influence on the son's masculine orientation in all theories. Table 1 compiles a sampling of factors in the sex-role adjustment process and the relationship with paternal deprivation as reported in the literature.

A factor not reflected in Table 1 is the need for children to see both parents appreciating compliments from one another. This interaction pattern is most influential in the child's total development. This chart also does not show that the child's sex-role orientation is relatively stable by or at three years of age. Sex-role preference and sex-role adoption may be greatly influenced by the external social environment. Peer and adult expectations build upon the strength and the stability of the child's sex-role orientation (Biller, 1974).

Emotional Development

The individual's emotional development is fostered by feeling experiences encountered when pursuing needs. Table 2 reflects the growing interest in studying the effects of fathering on personality development. The emotional scars created by absent fathers, by rejecting fathers and, by weak, passive fathers depreciate children's feelings of self work and adequacy both in their sexuality and in their general competency.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sex-Role Adjustment Fostered by Absent or Inadequate Paternal Interaction during Childhood as Reported in the Literature

| Paternal Interaction | Sex-Role Adjustment Characteristics | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | compensatory masculinity | negative image of adult males | less masculine sex-role orientation and/or low masculinity | sex-role conflict | sex-role anxiety |
| A. Physically Absent | | | | | |
| 1. divorce; separation; desertion | Lynn & Sawrey 1959; McCord, McCord & Thurber 1962* | | Biller 1968b, 1969b, 1974a; Biller & Bahn 1971; Leichty 1956; Burton 1972; Green 1974; Altus 1958; Kohlberg 1966 | Burton 1972; Burton & Whiting 1961 | Burton 1972; Burton & Whiting 1961; McCord, McCord & Thurber 1962 |
| 2. Death | | | | | |
| B. Low Availability; Low Participation | Lynn & Sawrey 1959 | | | | |
| C. Dysfunctional Child-Rearing Approaches | | | | | |
| 1. passive-maternal dominance or role-reversal | | Biller 1971 | | | |
| 2. over-restrictive | | | Hetherington 1965; Hetherington & Frankie 1967; Biller 1969a; Block von der Lippe & Block 1973 | | |
| 3. rejecting | Block, von der Lippe, & Block 1973 | | | | |

*Full references can be found in the bibliography at the back of the article.

Table 2. Emotional Characteristics Fostered by Absent or Inadequate Paternal Interaction during Childhood, as Reported in the Literature

| Paternal Interaction | Emotional Characteristics: emotionally disturbed | low self esteem; feelings of inferiority | poor personality adjustment | anxious fearful |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Physically Absent | | | | |
| 1. divorce separation desertion | Trunnel 1968* | Santrock 1970b | Stolz et al. 1954; Koch 1961 | |
| 2. death | | | | |
| B. Low Availability; Low Participation | | | Reuter & Biller 1973 | |
| C. Dysfunctional Child-Rearing Approaches | | | | |
| 1. passive maternal dominance or role-reversal | Alkire 1969 | Biller 1971 | Reuter & Biller 1973 | |
| 2. over-restrictive | Hoffman 1960; Ferreira et al. 1966 | Slater 1962 | Becker et al. 1959; Peterson et al. 1959 | Alkire 1969; Becker & Krug 1964 |
| 3. rejecting | | Mussen et al. 1963; Medinnus 1963 | | |

*Full references can be found in the bibliography at the back of the article.

Cognitive Development

The impact of paternal deprivation on cognitive development is reported to be cumulative (Deutsch & Brown, 1964) and to be greatest when the onset of absence begins in the first two years of the child's life (Santrock, 1973). Table 3 reflects the consistency of the findings and the quantity of research done which reports the negative influence of paternal deprivation on cognitive development.

Social Development

Learning to accept, learning to be accepted and learning to interact with both males and females begins at birth. In Table 4 effects upon the social development of children from father-absent and powerless males are reported. The area of social development and sex-role development of the male child and its possible relationship to fathering behaviors have been of interest to research for a long time.

Historically, fathers have been expected to interpret societal mores to their offspring. The absence of father and the effect of a passive or over-restrictive, rejecting father contribute greatly to anti-social behavior and higher crime rate for youth. The acting-out behavior of children in these families is not restricted by those paternal limits provided by the competent, leading father. The physical structure of the family, where father is absent or inadequate, erodes the force of mother's rules. An

Table 3. Cognitive Characteristics Fostered by Absent or Inadequate Paternal Interaction during Childhood as Reported in the Literature

| Paternal Interaction | Cognitive Characteristics | |
|---|---|---|
| | Feminine Patterns of Performance | Low Academic Aptitude/ Achievement/Motivation |
| A. Physically Absent | | |
| 1. divorce separation desertion | Carlsmith 1964; Altus 1958; Nelsen & Maccoby 1966 | Blanchard & Biller 1971; Deutsch & Brown 1964; Lessing, Zagorin & Nelson 1970; Santrock 1972; Sutton-Smith, Rosenberg & Landy 1968; Cortis & Fleming 1968; Kohlberg 1966 |
| 2. death | | |
| B. Low Availability Low Participation | | Mussen et al. 1963; Cervantes 1965; Blanchard & Biller 1971 |
| C. Dysfunctional Child-Rearing Approaches | | |
| 1. passive maternal dominance or role-reversal | | Cervantes 1965; Smelser 1963 |
| 2. over-restrictive | | Barton, Dielman & Cattell 1974; Radin 1973 |
| 3. rejecting | | Hurley 1967 |

Table 4. Social Characteristics Fostered by Absent or Inadequate Paternal Interaction during Childhood as Reported in the Literature

| Paternal Interaction | Social Characteristics | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | more negative antisocial behavior | dependency and conformity in peer relations; low aggression | indication of atypical moral development | higher crime rate and delinquency | preference for immediate gratification | mistrust of others | vocational adjustment problems |
| A. Physically Absent | | | | | | | |
| 1. divorce separation desertion | Siegmann 1966; Wylie & Delgado 1959 | Hetherington 1966; Sears 1951; Sears, Pintler, & Sears 1946; Bach 1946; Santrock 1970a; Stolz et al. 1954; McCord, McCord & Thurber 1962 | Hoffman 1971 | McCord, McCord & Thurber 1962; Anderson 1968 | Mischel 1961; Goldstein, 1972 | Santrock 1970b; Mischel 1958 | Suedfield 1967; Bell 1969 |
| 2. death | | | | | | | |
| B. Low Availability; Low Participation | | Bacon, Child & Barry 1963; Lynn & Sawrey 1959 | | Bacon, Child & Barry 1963 | | | |
| C. Dysfunctional Child-Rearing Approaches | | | | | | | |
| 1. passive maternal dominance or role-reversal | | Kagan 1964; Hoffman 1961 | Becker et al. 1959; Peterson et al. 1959 | | | | |
| 2. over-restrictive | | | | Jenkins 1968 | | | |
| 3. rejecting | | | | Bandura & Walters 1959; McCord, McCord & Howard 1959; Medinnus 1965 | | | |

ineffective father seems to invoke contempt and disregard for the male image (Biller, 1971).

Feminine Development

In his theory of sex-role development, Freud postulated that all children identify with the mother first and that the male child later identifies with the father from a sense of fear of father.

Studies are beginning to reflect the equal importance of father's influence in feminine development. The direction of the influence of negative fathering relationships is reflected in Table 5. How father treats mother, the amount and quality of the time spent interacting with daughters, the limits set and the expectations for behavior, and the continuity of presence all seem to greatly influence feminine development. A girl's heterosexual relationships are strongly aligned with the kind of fathering that she experiences.

A great deal of literature has been written defining masculinity and femininity. Stereotyped terms (Coonrod, 1977) are slowly disappearing and children are enjoying a fuller range of appropriate behaviors. Reaching one's highest potential as an individual cannot become reality until both sexes are valued by society.

Table 5. Characteristics of Female Behavior Fostered by Absent or Inadequate Paternal Interaction during Childhood as Reported in the Literature

| Paternal Interaction | Disruption of Feminine Development | Difficulty in Heterosexual Relationships | Low Personal Adjustment | Homosexual | Low Academic Aptitude/ Achievement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Physically Absent | | | Hetherington 1972 | | |
| 1. divorce separation desertion | Santrock 1970 | Hetherington 1972; Jacabson & Ruder 1969; Landy, Rosenberg, & Sutton-Smith 1967; Hetherington 1972 | | | Landy, Rosenberg, & Sutton-Smith 1969; Lessing, Zagorin & Nelson 1970 |
| 2. death | | | | | |
| B. Low Availability; Low Participation | Brown 1963 | | | | |
| C. Dysfunctional | | | | | |
| 1. passive | Biller & Zung 1972 | Hoffman 1961a | | Thompson et al. 1973 | |
| 2. over-restrictive to abusive | | | Becker & Krug 1964; Hoffman 1960; Block, von der Lippe & Block 1973; Lidz, Parker, Cornelison 1956; Fish & Biller 1973 | | |
| 3. rejecting | | | | | Heilburn et al. 1967; Hurley 1967 |

Implications

Fathers' availability and leadership are vital to the healthy functioning of each individual in the family. In this culture, fathers still band families together. Their contributions are not peripheral and indirect as they were believed to be for so long. Strengthening fathers' preparation for their responsibility is urgent.

Encouraging the offering of courses in child development to both pre-teenage boys and girls which include practicum opportunities; soliciting both expectant fathers and fathers of preschoolers to participate in parenting classes; and arranging for fathers to have direct input into the elementary school curriculum must become the foci of future planning.

Children seek other male models when they are available. Accessibility to a variety of male models also increases a child's ease in his interactions. To recognize the changing primary male models in many children's lives requires a different type of structuring for all programming. (Traditionally only the biological father and mother have been consulted and at that most often it was mother.) Openly including all the adults that have an impact on children's lives means a multi-dimensional approach to any reliable evaluation for programming decisions for children. This means having a multi-dimensional vision regarding the salient persons in children's lives.

Legal decisions for child custody must recognize the economic, social, emotional and cognitive handicaps that are inherent in the single parent matriarchal family. The child, however, must not become the slave of confusion and conflict from a lack of accessibility to either parent. The child must know that one parent assumes responsibility for his security. More and more often fathers are being granted their right to help structure his partial or full participation in the remaining child-rearing years.

Finally, the need to recommit ourselves as a society for responsible behavior, in and out of marriage, as both male and female in our biological roles, must be pursued. Both the creative act of human life and the healthy nurturance of children require a mother and a father.

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